DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 230 481 SO 014 757

AUTHOR Barger, Robert N.; Barger, Josephine C.
TITLE Amnesty in the New York Times: A Quantitative Case Study.
PUB DATE 1 May 83
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Editorials; *Newspapers; Political Issues; *Public Opinion; Social Science Research; Tables (Data)
IDENTIFIERS *Amnesty; *New York Times; Vietnam War

ABSTRACT

An analysis of opinion columns in the "New York Times" on the issue of amnesty for draft evaders during the Vietnam War provides a quantitative approach to investigating qualitative policy issues. A total of 93 editorials, guest editorials, and letters to the editor from 1971 through 1975 were examined. The material was classified as either pro or con on the issue and was then categorized according to the basis of argumentation: politics, fairness, efficacy, or legality. Variables included year of study, basis of argument, format (editorial, guest editorial, or letter), and position pro or con. Of the 93 pieces, 76 were pro on the issue and 17 were con; editorials written by the "Times" staff were 100 percent pro. The most frequent arguments were based on efficacy (i.e., amnesty was an effective way of reuniting those in need of it), followed by those based on fairness. The total number of opinion pieces was greatest in 1974 (38) and declined to 18 in 1975. Conclusions are that opinion pieces were basically a reflection of the existing opinion (of staff and readers) rather than a cause of this opinion. Also, most of the opinion material was reactive; none of the material examined was neutral. Finally, the format type forecast the content; letters to the editor were more likely to include arguments against amnesty, while editorials reflected the newspaper's position only. (KC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.
"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Robert N. Barger
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED230481

Amnesty in the New York Times: A Quantitative Case Study

Robert N. and Josephine C. Barger

May 1, 1983

Introduction

The formation of policy on any given public issue is a process as complex as it is fascinating. Many factors are involved in analyzing an issue in order to formulate a workable policy. This examination of factors will utilize a quantitative case analysis of a particular issue in recent history - the issue of amnesty during the Vietnam era. This analysis will yield conclusions which may be of value in understanding considerations involved in the formation of policy, not of this presently muted issue, but on another issue, namely, draft registration evasion on which policy is currently in formation. It is hoped that this study may suggest quantitative methods for use in investigating qualitative aspects of policy questions.

Design and Procedures

The issue of amnesty was chosen as a representative issue for policy investigation because of its close alignment with the issue of draft registration. Amnesty was an issue on which public opinion was sharply divided. Thus, an extended discussion of the issue, both pro and con, was readily available for analysis.

The time frame selected for the study was 1971 through 1975. This time frame was sufficiently removed from the present date of analysis to provide for an objective perspective on the discussion. The time frame also spanned the critical final years of the Vietnam era during which most of the public events occurred which significantly affected the discussion of amnesty.

Finally, the five-year period chosen was of sufficient length for the full spectrum of argumentative rationales to be developed and expressed on both sides of the issue.

The forum chosen for examination was The New York Times. The Times is generally recognized as one of the nation's foremost opinion-leaders. It took a strong editorial position on the pro side of the amnesty issue and opened its opinion columns to an extended discussion of both the pro and the con views. The material investigated in the Times was limited to opinion pieces. These were editorials, op-ed pieces and letters to the editor. Editorials were taken to include signed editorial columns of regular Times columnists as well as unsigned material. Op-ed pieces were the solicited and unsolicited guest columns on the page opposite the editorial page (hence the name "op-ed") for which compensation was given. Letters to the editor were, of course, both unsolicited and uncompensated.

Definition of the specificity of this material to the issue under analysis was standardized through use of The New York Times Index. The Index is an annual publication which indexes all stories in the Times according to topic. Material for the study was collected by identifying all of the citations of opinion pieces under the heading "Amnesty" in the Index for the years 1971 through 1975. Additional material was collected after it was identified by internal reference in the originally collected material. This additional material was not located in the original search of the Index because of the lack of explicit mention of amnesty in the Index's citation or because of an error of omission on the part of the Index editors.

The collected material was then classified by the writer according to its position pro or con on the issue. In almost every instance, the material

yielded to a clear pro or con classification. Only in the case of .3% of the material was the discretionary judgment of the writer called upon to determine which side of the issue was being more favorably emphasized. Thus, in the case of the "position pro or con" variable, there was a margin of error of $\pm$ .3%. In no instance did any of the material appear to be absolutely neutral.

A set of four indices was formulated for the study. These were judged to be sufficiently broad, reliable and generically coherent to validly classify the material. The indices which were developed divided the material according to the bases of argumentation on the issue, namely, according to arguments based on politics, efficacy, legality and fairness.

Material was indexed under the heading of politics if it argued the amnesty issue from the standpoint of its relationship to the formal political partisan process of government, e.g., how the issue of amnesty was being used in campaigning, law-making and administration. Material was indexed under the heading of efficacy if it argued the amnesty issue from the standpoint of whether it was an effective means to reuniting, without judging motivation, those who were, for whatever reason, in need of amnesty. Material was indexed under the heading of legality if it argued the amnesty issue from the standpoint of its relationship to law, e.g., whether it was in accord with constitutional and statutory law. Material was indexed under the heading of fairness if it argued the amnesty issue from the standpoint of ethics, e.g., whether the standards of natural equity were being served.

In some instances, more than one argument index was discussed in an opinion piece. In these cases, the piece was classified according to what appeared to be the predominating argument index in the piece. An indeterminable degree of subjectivity was involved in this judgment, but certain

material modifying the article (e.g., the emphasis in the article's headline and sub-heads) often provided a check on this subjectivity.

Any given study of this type will be made up of different sets of factors and circumstances than the ones in the present investigation and thus will necessitate the development of different sets of indices for classification than the ones used here. There is an admittedly subjective element in this type of undertaking. This subjectivity pertains not only to the development of the indices, but also to the classification of the material by them. In the end, the subjective element will be tested by how well the material fits the indices which have been developed and by how well the indices help to explain the material when it is analyzed.

Four variables resulted from the design of the study. They were: year of study, argument indices, format type and position pro or con. The number of modes for each of these variables differed: there were five modes for the year of study (one for each year from 1971 through 1975), four for the argument indices (one for each index of politics, efficacy, law and fairness), three for the format type (one for each of the formats of editorial, op-ed piece and letter to the editor), and two for the position pro or con (one for a position favoring amnesty and one for a position opposing it). Given the variables and their modes, the material is best presented for analysis by a tabular organization as follows: argument index and position pro or con, by year (Table 1); format type and position pro and con, by year (Table 2); and a summary presentation of all four variables--format type and year, by argument index and position pro or con (Table 3).

Discussion of Findings

The total number of opinion pieces analyzed was 93 (See Table 1). The kinds of arguments most often used in these pieces were arguments based on

efficacy 44 (47.3%). The next most frequently used arguments were those based on fairness. Here the index total was 37 (39.8%). Least frequently used were arguments based on politics and law. The totals for each of these indices were politics 8 (8.6%) and law 4 (4.3%).

Of the 93 opinion pieces, 76 (82%) were pro on the issue and 17 (18%) were con. The pros predominated in three of the four argument indices. The one exception was law. The indices were: 6 pro to 2 con in politics, 39 pro to 5 con in efficacy, 1 pro to 3 con in law, and 30 pro to 7 con in fairness. When an examination is made on an annual basis, the total pro arguments are consistently greater than the total con arguments for the five years studied. It was in the year 1974 that the total number (38) of opinion pieces was the greatest. By the end of the following year (1975) there were only 18 opinion pieces, a decline of 20 from 1974, perhaps an indication of the defusion of the issue due to the Ford "Clemency Program".

There is no legal compulsion in the print media, as there is in the electronic media, to provide equal time for opposing opinions on public policy questions. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the Times' presentation of the issue was somewhat unrepresentative. The over-all totals indicate that 76 of the 93 pieces were pro and 17 were con (See Table 2). There were 19 editorials on the issue, of which 19 were pro and none con. Letters numbered 65, with 48 pro and 17 con. Examining the pro and con comparison for each of the argument indices during each of the five years of the study, the pros predominated by 50% or more (See Table 1).

By examining Table 3, the relation between format types and argument indices can be established. Of the 19 editorials, 2 fell under the index of politics, 10 under efficacy, none under law and 7 under fairness. Of the

9 op-eds, none were under politics, 5 under efficacy, 1 under law and 3 under fairness. Of the 65 letters, 6 were under politics, 29 under efficacy, 3 under law and 27 under fairness. It can thus be seen that while the major appeal of the editorials was to efficacy considerations, the major appeals of the letters were to both efficacy and fairness considerations favoring amnesty.

Conclusion

Several points can be offered in conclusion about the effect of the argumentation examined in this study on the formation of policy dealing with public issues. First, because of the influence of contemporary events on the argumentation, as was noted above, it seems that the opinion pieces presented were basically a reflection of existing opinion, rather than a cause of this opinion. At most, they probably served as a reinforcement of already-formed attitudes on the part of the liberal majority of the Times' readers. Secondly, much of the opinion presentation in the Times on this issue was reactive in character. This is indicated by the fact that none of the material examined was neutral, and in just three tenths of one percent of the cases was there any question about which side of the question was being more clearly favored in a piece. Eighty-two percent of all the material presented in the Times was on the pro side of the issue. In the case of the Times' own editorial position, its editorials were 100% pro. Finally, the two previous points, when combined lead to a third conclusion. The fact that the material is reinforcing as opposed to causative, and reactive as opposed to balanced seems to indicate that "the medium is the message." What this means is that, after examining the results of this study, one knows without even reading it what the position of a Times

editorial will likely be, or what kind of arguments a con letter to the editor will likely use. In other words, the format types of discussion on this issue will often forecast the content.

Many more implications could be drawn from the three tables of data than have been presented here. Hopefully, however, enough implications have been presented to indicated how quantitative means can be used to investigate qualitative issues.

Table 1

Argument Index and Position Pro or Con, By Year

	Politics			Efficacy			Law			Fairness			Totals		
	Pro	Con	All	Pro	Con	All	Pro	Con	All	Pro	Con	All	Pro	Con	All
1971	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	2	1	3
1972	2	2	4	5	1	6	0	0	0	6	0	6	13	3	16
1973	1	0	1	7	1	8	0	1	1	6	2	8	14	4	18
1974	2	0	2	15	2	17	0	1	1	15	3	18	32	6	38
1975	0	0	0	12	1	13	0	0	0	3	2	5	15	3	18
	6	2	8	39	5	44	1	3	4	30	7	37	76	17	93

Table 2

Format Type and Position Pro or Con, By Year

	Editorials			Op-eds			Letters			Totals		
	Pro	Con	All	Pro	Con	All	Pro	Con	All	Pro	Con	All
1971	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	2	2	1	3
1972	4	0	4	3	0	3	6	3	9	13	3	16
1973	1	0	1	2	0	2	11	4	15	14	4	18
1974	9	0	9	2	0	2	21	6	27	32	6	38
1975	5	0	5	1	0	1	9	3	12	15	3	18
	19	0	19	9	0	9	48	17	65	76	17	93

Table 3

Format Type and Year, By Argument Index and Position Pro or Con

		Editorials						Op-eds						Letters						
		71	72	73	74	75	All	71	72	73	74	75	All	71	72	73	74	75	All	Totals
Politics	Pro	0	1	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	4	6
	Con	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	2
	All	0	1	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	1	1	0	6	8
Efficacy	Pro	0	2	0	4	4	10	0	2	1	2	0	5	0	1	6	9	8	24	39
	Con	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	1	5	5
	All	0	2	0	4	4	10	0	2	1	2	0	0	0	2	7	11	9	29	44
Law	Pro	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Con	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	3	3
	All	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	3	3
Fairness	Pro	0	1	1	4	1	7	0	1	1	0	1	3	0	4	4	11	1	20	30
	Con	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	2	7	7
	All	0	1	1	4	1	7	0	1	1	0	1	3	0	4	6	14	3	27	37
		0	4	1	9	5	19	1	3	2	2	1	9	2	9	15	27	12	65	93